

Columbia Indians lived the 'good life'

One of the world's unique cultures, that of the Indians of the lower Columbia River, lay here for many centuries, unknown to the rest of the world.

Less than 200 years ago this area had not yet been seen by what we call civilized man. The Indians who lived here were protected from intruders by mountain ranges to the east and west, by dense forests on the north and by Indian tribes at the site of Oregon City on the Willamette. There were no crossing trails to allow outsiders to disturb the tranquility of this ancient civilization.

boiled or baked it when fresh and learned how to dry it to keep through the winter. They developed a religious belief around the salmon, which they said were really children of Indians who lived in the bottom of the ocean. The first salmon sighted each spring was the object of worship before it was made into a stew for all to savor. Then the bones were thrown back into the river with a prayer that the spirit of the fish return to the ocean depths and tell its brothers and sisters how well it was treated in the upriver village. The resulting

of bark, wove hats of grass shaped like Chinese "coolie" hats, and wove vessels that would hold water for cooking. The water was heated by dropping hot stones into the vessels.

In the summer the men wore nothing, the women grass skirts not unlike those of the Polynesians. They wore sandals, smoked pipes, wore ear and lip plugs like African blacks, painted their bodies and used spears and bows and arrows. For harpooning salmon they used shafts on which arrow heads were loosely attached. Often an Indian could spear three salmon in one throw!

They also developed numerous devices for trapping fish, and credited their deity, the coyote, with teaching them how.

They had slaves who were Indians captured from other tribes. To differentiate between freeborn and slave Indians, our local Indians used a headboard to deform the heads of their babies as they grew, so that an adult's profile would be a straight line from the top of the head to the tip of the nose.

The chief of the tribe, who may have governed several villages, held office only because of his physical strength and powers of persuasion. Heredity was not part of their system.

Most impressive of all, these Indians lived in long houses built of cedar planks with pitched roofs to shed the rain and snow. Part of the houses were usually sunk into the ground, and the number of persons accommodated sometimes ran into the hundreds. Typical, however, was a seven-unit long house found by Lewis and Clark south of Government Island in 1806.

Remains were found in more recent times of a house on the Washougal River not far from the present bowling alley. In research done by Martha Ford of Washougal, we learn that some Indians above Government Island lived in circular houses, perhaps built in the shape of tepees.

There were many signs of

villages at the mouth of the Washougal, but these have disappeared under the advance of civilization. Many arrowheads and other artifacts have been found, even in recent years, along the lower Washougal. On the north side of the river there was a site, practically undisturbed when originally found, containing 11 house pits up to four feet deep and 40 feet in diameter.

The Indians had interesting customs for burying their dead. One of these burial grounds was Bead Island, on Lackamas Creek where it flows into the Washougal. Another was Evergreen Terrace, where the Catholic Church is now

How did the Indians get here? Like all other Indians in the New World, their ancestors migrated from Mongolia over a land bridge to Alaska during the last Ice Age. Probably they followed game, such as the now-extinct mastodon. Some fanned out to the west and to the east. Others kept going south until they reached Central and South America.

When did the migration start? Archeologists believe it was 25,000 years ago. The best estimate is that they reached the area around The Dalles more than 12,000 years ago, and on this side of the Cascades about 6,000 years ago.

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located.

Bodies would be buried in canoes on stilts, and food left for the journey of the spirits of the dead Indians to heaven. The dead men's prize spears, bows and arrows would be buried below the canoes, as would the bodies of their favorite slaves. The objects would be broken to let their spirits escape to heaven also, and the slaves would be killed so they too could join their masters in the Great Beyond.

One chief, whose favorite son died of cholera in the epidemic of 1829-30, decided the young man needed his mother with him in heaven to look after him, so he sent for his Number One wife to be killed and buried with her child. She got wind of it and fled home to "papa" on the Oregon coast.

There may have been as many as 50,000 Indians living along the river between The Dalles and the Pacific Ocean. However, in the 1770s they were seized by an epidemic of smallpox and died by the thousands. The disease must have been transmitted by an infected Spanish seaman put ashore on the Oregon coast. Lewis and Clark estimated about 15,000 survivors in 1805. The later cholera epidemic all but wiped out this race of Indians. Only a few descendants still remain, mostly in the Quinalt reservation.

Early pioneers told of Indians living along the river. Hazel Chandler's grandmother said the Indians would walk into the house to see how white people lived. They would go into the kitchen and look into the utensils on the stove to see what was cooking.

Grandmother was afraid of the Indians because of the horror stories of the Whitman massacre and of the uprisings of the 1850s, 60s and 70s. She often dreamed of Indians "on the warpath." What she did not understand was the Indians' unwillingness to give up their customs and to be "imprisoned" on reservations. Indians did not understand the practice of land ownership. To them the land belonged to all, to be used by all.

George Stoller remembers, when he was a boy, Indians coming to town to make small purchases and to sit on the curbs and meditate. Indians also brought huckleberries and fish to sell.

But now the Indians of the Camas-Washougal area are gone. Mother Earth still holds many secrets of this unique Indian civilization which will be revealed only as archeologists dig them up. In cultural evolution these "native Americans" may have been equal to the Aztecs and Mayans in their understanding of Nature's mysteries. —M.B.



A COLUMBIA RIVER Indian navigates an inland passage on Wappato Island.

These Indians used canoes as their sole means of transportation. What few horses that finally showed up were a source of food, not transportation. The only beast of burden was the dog which sometimes was used to pull two poles, one end of each tied to his middle and the other dragging the ground. Across these poles, salmon and other products were loaded.

The Indians with their dug-out cedar canoes eventually developed the life of tradespeople, swapping salmon for dried berries with the Yakimas and peddling them to the Indians on Vancouver Island. To make the trip north they built very large canoes that rode the high seas as safely as any white man's vessel. To facilitate trading they developed a trade language, later called the Chinookan jargon, made up of several Indian dialects. As white men entered the picture, the jargon took on French and English words.

The Columbia River salmon was the mainstay of the local Indians' diet. They

salmon run proved the wisdom of the custom!

Local Indians also smoked sturgeon, often 15 feet or longer when caught, bear and venison. They also went far out to sea on whaling missions, using a float made by inflating a skin to keep track of their prey. Often a whale would take them 50 miles out before it gave up in exhaustion. Whale oil was an important item to the Indians, used among other things for washing down the body and "grooming" the hair. The resulting smell bothered white men, but the Indians liked it!

These Indians had many skills. They made cloth out



THIS IS TYPICAL of the type of canoe used by Columbia Indians during the time of Lewis and Clark's visit.